

My Turn: It's time to stop school idling

School is back in session as buses weave along Vermont's roads to convey their precious cargo. On an average day, 1,800 school buses shuttle 7 5,000 students to and from school.

As an environmental educator and storyteller who presents at many schools, I often arrive with the students, only to encounter acrid fumes from the exhausts of buses and automobiles idling while drivers drop off their kids. Delivery vehicles add to the toxic mix.

Fumes also get sucked into ventilation systems and blown indoors. Since many schools lack air conditioning and must keep windows open during hot weather, pollution invades rooms adjacent to student drop-off zones. Although these conditions have been relieved at some Vermont schools by a 2007 law designed to control idling (Act 48), many children still breathe air pollution daily.

Every year, exhausts from idling cars, trucks and buses generate millions of pounds of air pollution, including particles that lodge deep inside the lungs and toxic gases such as nitrogen oxide, sulfur dioxide and carbon monoxide. Exhaust from a single car that idles 5 minutes each day creates 30 pounds per year of toxic pollution and 300 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions that contribute to global warming. People in and around idling vehicles, and in nearby schoolrooms, inhale this insidious elixir.

Because children are smaller and take more breaths than adults, they inhale 50 percent more air pollution per pound of body weight. Health problems caused by exhaust gases are acute for children with asthma -- the leading cause of hospital visits for youth.

Engine idling also contributes to the rising cost of health care by:

Increasing the treatment of respiratory distress caused by exhaust fumes among asthmatic children and adults.

Increasing the need to treat other respiratory conditions that are aggravated by exhaust gases.

Shutting off engines while waiting for longer than ten seconds reduces wear, saves fuel and decreases pollution. Modern diesel fuels and engine designs have eliminated the need to keep engines running while kids disembark, even in cold weather. At any rate: the cost of engine upkeep is finite, but the worth of maintaining the longterm health of our children is priceless.

Kids have taken the lead by organizing local, regional and statewide campaigns to stop idling on school grounds. Students have testified before government officials and lobbied legislators to pass controls. As a result, some states and municipalities now require school buses to turn off engines if they idle for more than 10 seconds.

In 2007, students from Browns River Middle School in the town of Jericho spearheaded a lobbying effort that led to the passing of Act 48, establishing regulations that prohibit school buses from idling while on school grounds and encouraging schools to adopt anti-idling zones

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for all other vehicles on school property.

But there is no provision for enforcing Act 48 and no one knows exactly how many schools have established no-idling zones. As for adopting a policy to control idling for vehicles other than buses: a recent survey conducted of Vermont's 253 school boards and districts by the Vermont School Boards Association (VSBA) was returned by one-third of the school boards. Of these, 40 percent have created such a policy, which is only 12 percent of Vermont's total school boards.

Fortunately, Vermonters have a statewide organization called Idle-Free VT that promotes clean air by eliminating idling in our communities. Anyone who wants to learn more and get involved can visit: www.idlefreevt.org.

Slowly, the air is clearing. Last June, when I drove up to Fayston Elementary School in north-central Vermont, Anti-Idling signs stood where students were being dropped off. Nearby, the school's electrical-generating windmill spun in the breeze. Over time, schools like Fayston, Weybridge and others are getting idling under control.

Students, parents and members of communities who care about the health of children and [the environment](#) can lobby school administrators and boards to establish firm no-idling policies for all vehicles on school grounds. Isn't it time that our kids' new school year truly begins with a breath of fresh air?

Michael J. Caduto of Reading travels widely, presenting environmental and cultural programs for all ages, including Kids' [Power: Energy Alternatives for Today's Kids](#). His website is www.p-e-a-c-e.net.

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Mom Dilemma #36:
Your daughter insists on wearing her princess costume to the grocery store. Allow it or not?

YES, at least she's dressed!

NO, I have some rules!

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